Linguistic Manipulation of Political Myth in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*

Ayman F. Khafaga¹²

¹ Department of English, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Suez Canal University, Egypt
² Department of English, College of Science and Humanities, Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Correspondence: Ayman Farid Khafaga, Department of English Language, College of Science and Humanities, Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. E-mail: a.khafaga@psau.edu.sa or Khafagaayman@yahoo.com

Received: February 13, 2017   Accepted: February 27, 2017   Online Published: March 4, 2017
doi:10.5539/ijel.v7n3p189       URL: http://doi.org/10.5539/ijel.v7n3p189

Abstract
This paper investigates the linguistic manipulation of political myth in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*. More specifically, the paper discusses the myth of *the good of the nation* which is linguistically manipulated verbally and nonverbally throughout the novel. Atwood’s novel is one of the distinguished dystopian narratives in the twentieth century. This type of fiction has always been a reflection of the irrationalities committed against people by those in power. This paper exposes the strategies of linguistic manipulation used by those in power to propagate for the *good of the nation* myth, which in turn strengthens their position, justifies their actions, and guarantees their continuation in power. In doing so, the paper uses Political Discourse Analysis to be the approach of analyzing the selected data. Lexical choices, didactic indoctrination, religionization and dehumanization are among the strategies used in the analysis of data. The main objective of this paper is to elaborate the extent to which the *good of the nation* myth is used by some regimes to oppress and dominate the public into complete submission to their goals. It is also an attempt to provide the public with some sort of linguistic enlightenment so as to be aware of the use and abuse of language in shaping and/or misshaping the public’s attitudes. The conclusion drawn from this paper shows that politicians rhetorically manipulate myths to normalize their practices and legitimize their irrationalities.

Keywords: linguistic manipulation, political discourse analysis, political myth, *The Handmaid’s Tale*

1. Introduction
Today’s world is dominated by politics and power which enforce a specific type of language that serves to shape people’s responses and change their attitudes. Within such an atmosphere, language appears to be an effective tool which determines the way we think and the manner we behave since it can be manipulated to expose facts or falsify them. Nowadays, the world witnesses huge discursive campaigns under different names; be they political, social, or religious, which aim to change and redirect the public’s attitudes and behavior. These campaigns manipulate language in a way that serves their initiators’ goals and guarantees political, social and religious loyalty to their systems. This study therefore tends to expose some political strategies that are manipulated to produce and reinforce the *good of the nation* myth. It also tries to offer the public a linguistic immunity against different types of linguistic manipulation so as to be aware of the use and misuse of language. This will be conducted by shedding lights on some selected strategies which are used in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* to propagate for the *good of the nation* myth. Regardless of the fact that the novel is a work of fiction, it abounds in some political strategies which are typically manipulated by politicians in today’s politics, here and there. The paper therefore tries to make a connection from the selected novel to the way that actual regimes use language to manipulate the public.

Creating myths is “a normal feature of political life” (Flood, 2002, p. 11) because they are used by those in power to dominate the public. This paper attempts to clarify how political myths are linguistically represented in discourse to effectively manipulate the masses. It also directs our attention to rethink all types of discourse so as to be aware of the role of language as a decisive element in the struggle against oppression, domination, and manipulation. The paper’s significance lies in its attempt to provide the public with some sort of linguistic
enlightenment of the use and abuse of language in political life, to immunize them against the manipulative use of language, and to stimulate their resistant potentialities to fight all forms of linguistic manipulation. This paper, therefore, tries to achieve four main objectives: First, to expose prejudices and irrationalities committed against people by those in power in the name of the good of the nation, second, to illuminate the public of the manipulative strategies used by politicians to manipulate their people into submission to their own goals, and fourth, to direct the public’s attention to rethink the discursive practices of those in power so as to determine whether these practices tend to illuminate or to manipulate.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Political Discourse Analysis

There are many definitions of political discourse analysis (henceforth PDA), some of them focus on the argumentation practices, and others deal with it from a critical perspective. Fairclough & Fairclough (2012) view political discourse as primarily a type of argumentation which deals with the argumentative strategies used by politicians to convey certain discursive practices. Van Dijk (1997) focuses on the reproduction of power in discourse. He clarifies that PDA aims to analyze political discourse critically by showing how power is produced and reproduced in discourse. Van Dijk maintains that understanding of the different discursive practices in discourse depends entirely on the understanding of the contextual environment in which such practices are produced and received. Van Dijk (2004) states that when political discourse analysis deals with the inherent characteristics of discourse, it manages then to offer solutions for many political issues. Thus, the analyst’s ability to understand the argumentative nature of political texts enables him/her to demonstrate the hidden political strategies in texts. On the level of analysis, political discourse analysis has two dimensions; “cognitive” and “pragmatic” (Chilton & Schaffner, 2002, p.25). The cognitive dimension, on the one hand, is concerned with the linguistic structures and their discursive representations in the mind. The pragmatic dimension, on the other hand, concentrates on the status of the speaker when he produces the discursive act, and studies the use of indexical expressions in the analysis of texts.

There are two main approaches to political discourse analysis which have influential contributions to this field. They are Chilton’s approach and Wodak’s approach. Chilton’s approach (2004), on the one hand, is a significant model of political discourse analysis which is extensively used in political discourse studies. This approach is related to both cognitive science and cognitive linguistics. It offers interesting insights on the relationship between language and politics from a cognitive perspective. Chilton summarizes his view of political discourse in terms of a list of twelve propositions (Chilton, 2004, pp. 198-205). These include some interesting claims that can be taken up in political discourse analysis. particularly if one pursues questions of representation (e.g., metaphors and binary distinctions are frequent in politics, political discourse draws on spatial cognition, political representations are sets of role-players and relations, etc.). PDA’s focus on the relationship between language and politics makes it relevant to the study of political myth because it helps uncover the manipulative strategies used to produce and strengthen the good of the nation myth.

Ruth Wodak (2009a, 2009b), on the other hand, has been contributing remarkably to political discourse analysis studies. Her discourse historical approach establishes a close relationship between politics and public attitudes, political administration, and political control. Her approach can be seen to be classificatory because it gives a persuasive picture of the absolute variety of political discourse. She sees politics to be about imposing representations and how these representations serve power. Wodak (2009a, p. 24) identifies six dimensions of politics. Briefly, these are said to be: (i) the staging/ performance of politics (the front stage); (ii) the everyday life of politics and politicians (the back stage); (iii) the impact of politicians’ personality (charisma, credibility) on performance; (iv) the mass-production of politics (media, advisors); (v) the recontextualization of politics in the media; (vi) participation in politics (i.e., power, ideology, gate-keeping, legitimacy and representation). Wodak’s approach conceives politics to be a site where language, power and ideology are incorporated to produce political discourse. The ability of politicians to manipulate language, power and ideology politically is significant in the production of political myth.

2.2 Political Myth

Myths created by politicians are always “ways of communicating ideology” (Charteris-Black, 2005, p. 22). A myth can be understood to be a story which offers some sort of explanation of and justification for things and actions in a way which makes them acceptable to their receivers. Flood (2002) argues that political myth has been linked to the discourse of domination and inequality where one group practices a particular type of control
over another. He maintains that within the framework of politics, political myth carries ideological assumptions which tend to find excuses for any discursive political practice to be accepted as valid by one specific social group. Jowett & O’Donnel (1992) reinforce the idea that myth is considered to be a story in which meaning is conveyed by repeated symbols and events. They also discuss the idea of the public’s readiness to accept these myths and their predisposition to act.

Focusing on the intention beyond any political myth, Barthes (1972) defines the term to be a discursive practice which requires an intentionally-based message beyond its surface meaning. Menz (1989, p. 233) also discusses the function of myth arguing that it has the ability to connect together the different social groups in a given society. Myths, for Menz, are the force that push these groups of people forward to set a base upon which they represent their interests and create a common basis of identification among them.

Flood (2002, p. 45) points out that the classification of myth to be political or not lies not only in the political content of the story that it tells, but also in the fact that the story that it tells comes to “make significance” of the specifically political conditions for a certain social group or society. Political conditions, here, mean “the conditions concerning the struggle for the distribution of power and resources which can, as a last resort, have recourse to physical force.” Political myths can shorten things into representations, linguistically and non-linguistically, which carry their ideologically-laden messages. They are launched therefore to achieve a political goal which always serves the privileges of those in power.

2.2.1 Related Literature on Political Myth

A thorough discussion for a theory of political myth can be found in Spinoza’s (1951) *A Theologico-Political Treatise and a Political Treatise* in which he offers a fully developed theory of political imagination. Spinoza discusses the modern political theory focusing on the notion of power and its relationship with the theory of democracy. He states that all kinds of state laws must be instituted in such a way that human beings are bound not by fear but by hope of something that they desire in a particular way. Spinoza’s theory of political imagination can be considered as a reflection on the problem of how such a hope can be socially created by manipulating myths or by other means.

In his book, *The Myth of the State*, Cassirer (1973, p. 279) discusses the role that political myth plays in the state and analyzes the myth of the Aryan race arguing that this myth makes a connection between narrative and scientific findings, such as the biological superiority of the Aryan race. The book starts with a section where myth is defined as the form of life that characterizes traditional societies and then moves on to analyze “the struggle against myth in the history of political philosophy.” It is only here that Cassirer faces the problem of the presence of myth in modern politics. Consequently, he argues that political myths are desperate means. The return of myth, he asserts, is only reasonable as the last resort for facing a situation of deep crisis when rational means are not available.

With the advent of the twentieth century and before the publication of *The Myth of the State*, another book came to light to develop another theory of political myth from a different perspective. It is Sorel’s *Reflections on Violence* (1975, p. 22) in which he argues that political myth cannot be considered to be religion, and that is why it has an effective role in contemporary politics. Sorel’s political myth stems from a practical engagement with one of the typically modern phenomena: the proletarian struggle. In Sorel’s view, such a struggle has provided modern history with many changes which come as a result of using political myths.

According to Bennett (1980), it is because of the absence of formalized political ideologies in American politics that political myths secretly tend to guide the whole process of forming public opinions and making policies. Bennett explains the systematic effect of political myth on the way the public think. In Bennett’s view, myths show a number of characteristics of American politics, including public debates, political conflict, and political order.

Flood (2002) has also pointed out that political myths can offer essential cognitive framework which is concerned with shaping and reshaping the social world. This can be implemented by relating the difficulties of social life to the relative simplicity of the myth’s narrative plot. This function of myth highlights its practical side which is referred to by Sorel (1975) who points out that the people involved in social action need to represent their upcoming action in the form of a narrative or sequence of events that assures the triumph of their cause. In such cases, political myths function to be a basis upon which people relate their arguments and advocate their social practices.

Edelman (qtd. in Charteris-Black, 2005, p. 25) identifies three particular political myths which are extensively manipulated in modern politics; first, the *Conspiratorial Enemy* myth which propagates for the idea that an
aggressive out-group enemy is conspired against an in-group, second, the Valiant Leader myth in which information about the courage, benevolence, heroism, and wisdom of a leader is circulated among the public, and third, the United We Stand myth which conveys that a country’s victory can only be achieved by a complete compliance to and sacrifice for the leader of such a country.

3. Methodology

This paper uses Political Discourse Analysis as a methodological approach to analyze the linguistic manipulation of political myth in Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale. This approach is relevant to the study of political myth since it aims, according to Chilton & Schaffner (2002), to analyze discursive political practices in order to expose implicit and explicit power strategies, and to demonstrate the impact of these discursive practices on the public. Some political discourse strategies are marked in the selected work as indicative in the production of political myth. These strategies are highlighted and then linguistically analyzed to show how they are used to propagate for the good of the nation myth.

3.1 Corpus of the Study

The corpus of the present paper consists of one novel written by Margaret Atwood: The Handmaid’s Tale. It consists of forty-six chapters, distributed in fifteen parts and followed by historical notes. The novel under investigation was written in 1985 by the Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood. It is one of the dystopian novels of the twentieth century which narrates the story of Offred, the Handmaid, who is taken from her family to be a handmaid in the Republic of Gilead; a totalitarian system that replaces the United States of America. Within Gilead’s regime, women are kept for reproductive purposes due to sterility. All handmaids including Offred are subjugated, dominated and indoctrinated to a very severe system of life in which the majority of human rights are missed. They are indoctrinated to only one doctrine; that is to sacrifice soul and body for the sake of their country, a myth created by the elites to guarantee their continuity in power and to maintain social control over Gileadean people.

3.2 The Good of the Nation Myth

The good of the nation myth is a political myth created by politicians in order to justify their violations. This type of myth makes use of the notion of nationality through which the public’s potential energies are stimulated so as to accept any unreasonable acts without any objections. It always attempts to escape any possible criticism because it advocates national ideas. The good of the nation myth depends on propagating for the ideological belief that advocates all forms of domination committed against people as mere necessities to achieve the good and glory of their nation. Nowadays, this myth is politically manipulated throughout the world to legalize the illogical and to defend the irrational. Dictatorial regimes are always manipulating language to propagate for this type of myth so as to find appropriate justifications for the oppressive practices they commit against their people.

3.3 Framework of Data Analysis

Tracing the discourse of the novel under investigation, one can identify many political discourse strategies which are dexterously manipulated to create the myth of the good of the nation and reinforce it. However, the analysis will be confined to only seven strategies, which are also used in everyday politics, in an attempt to draw a link between what is conveyed in the novel and what is happening in today’s politics.

The first strategy is lexical choices. Two strategies which depend on the ideological selection of words are used in the discourse of the novel: promises and repetition. According to Fairclough (1989, p.115), Words and phrases always carry connotations which are derived from their frequent use. He argues that ideology can be expressed and conveyed through the use of some skillfully selected words. The second strategy is didactic indoctrination, which means, according to Gatchel (2010, p. 8), “the implanting of doctrines” and carries the connotations of “a coercive type of education.” This strategy is manifested through the use of bald on-record strategies. These strategies, according to Yule (1996), are the expressions used in discursive practices in which the speaker believes that he has power over his recipients in a way which makes him able to control their actions by means of words. The third strategy is legitimizing the forbidden, which is represented by the use of bargaining and justification. Politicians often resort to justification by claiming the public interest to find excuses for any mischievous act and to guarantee the pass of their decisions and the silence of their recipients. For Van Dijk (1993), practices of dominance in any society often require some justification tactics to distance their initiators from being blamed for any mischief. Bargaining is a political device which depends on the reciprocity of interests between participants where the powerful is always the initiator. To Chilton (2004), bargaining is essentially needed in political process as it functions to be a communicative channel between initiators and receivers.
Beautifying the present and vilifying the past is the fourth strategy used in the analysis of data. It is derived from Van Dijk’s (1997a) positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation strategies which are considered to be one of the most valuable ways of analyzing forms of political discourse. These strategies attempt to “influence world opinion, that is, the minds of the public at large” (Van Dijk, 1997b, p. 23). The fifth strategy is dehumanization, which are attached to political discourse analysis when it addresses topics of domination, oppression and marginality. Smith (2011) emphasizes the psychological dimension of dehumanization when he argues that it occurs in situations where one group wants to psychologically harm another group. He also maintains that dehumanization is realized when a person repudiate another person’s humanity. The sixth strategy is religionization, which has been used by politicians to find a religious shield that defends their irrationalities. This strategy is represented through the employment of some religious verses which are derived from the Holy Books, such as the Bible and the Holy Quran. These verses come to be used as slogans in the hands of politicians to religionize their discourse. According to Sarfati (2014), religious texts are skillfully selected and manipulated to “vilify political opponents.” Pinto (2004, p. 661) also points out that slogans are considered to be “a form of control” because they activate dictation and undermine understanding among recipients. The seventh strategy is the use of nonverbal language, which is represented in the use of violence. Violence depends on the physical dimension of power and means “the inflicting of physical pain or injury by one person or another, often with the implication of excessive force.” (Barish, 1991, p. 101) The following table summarizes the strategies used in data analysis and their representations.

Table 1. Political discourse strategies and their representations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political Discourse Strategy</th>
<th>Representations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lexical choices</td>
<td>Promises—repetition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didactic indoctrination</td>
<td>Bald on-record strategies (imperatives)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legitimizing the forbidden</td>
<td>Bargaining—Justification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beautifying the present and vilifying the past</td>
<td>Euphemism—dysphemism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dehumanization</td>
<td>Out-group degrading treatment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religionization</td>
<td>Using Holy Books verses—slogans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonverbal strategies</td>
<td>Violence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Data Analysis, Discussion and Findings

4.1 Lexical Choices

The use of specific words and phrases is indicative in propagating for the good of the nation myth in The Handmaid’s Tale. Fowler (1991) emphasizes the importance of lexis in the analysis of political texts because they usually carry the ideological belief of their users. Promises and repetition are two political ploys which totally depend on the skillful use of words. Promises are used in the discourse of the novel to manipulatively motivate the handmaids’ potential energies in order to work diligently and suffer patiently for the good of their nation. Aunt Lydia tries to picturize a brilliant future for the handmaids when, according to her, “the women will live in harmony together, all in one family; you will be like daughters to them...there can be bonds of real affection.” (The Handmaid’s Tale: 171 (henceforth THT)) Aunt Lydia’s selection of the phrases “in harmony”, “one family”, “like daughters”, and “real affections” is highly indicative since they carry the connotative meanings of stability, security and welfare. The use of the truth modal “will” is also indicative since it emphasizes the idea that Aunt Lydia’s promises will come true provided that “each performing her appointed task” (THT: 171) which ultimately serves the good of Gilead.

Aunt Lydia emphasizes the promising future for the handmaids when she promises them, “Your daughters will have greater freedom.” (THT: 172) Her use of the second person pronoun “you” and the truth modal “will” is highly indicative in reinforcing the myth of the good of the nation. The second-person pronoun “you” in Aunt Lydia’s statement is used as “an indefinite pronoun” (Fairclough, 1989, p. 128) which implies a relationship of solidarity between her and her recipients. Her use of the truth modal “will” expresses “a high level of certitude” (Flowerdew, 2002, p. 219) and shows that her assumption of a promising future is completely true. The use of the comparative adjective “greater” rather than the pure adjective “great” also conveys two meanings: the first is that there is already some sort of freedom the handmaids lead under Gilead’s new system, and the second is that the complete compliance to Gilead’s rules will, ironically, lead to much more freedom in the future.

The skillful use of specific words to assure better future conditions for the handmaids continues when Aunt Lydia says, “we are working towards the goal of a little garden for each one, each one of you” (THT: 172). Aunt
Lydia’s use of both the first person plural pronoun “we” and the repetitive phrase “each one” is indicative. As for the first-person plural pronoun “we”, it is used inclusively because it includes both speaker and hearer, and attempts superficially to convey the feeling of participation, closeness and intimacy between Aunt Lydia and the handmaids. This atmosphere of counterfeit closeness and false solidarity, which is expressed by Aunt Lydia’s inclusive “we”, functions to manipulate the handmaids by strengthening the idea that all of them are on the same boat and have the same fate; they are ready to sacrifice soul and body for the good of their nation. Aunt Lydia’s repetitive phrase “each one” attempts to confirm that the handmaids will lead a happy and comfortable life in the future which in turn emphasizes the idea that what happens in Gilead is intended for its glory. Repetition, for Brembeck & Howell (1952, p. 177), “serves to clarify and to hold attention to an idea until it becomes a part of the future which in turn emphasizes the idea that what happens in Gilead is intended for its glory. Repetition, for Brembeck & Howell (1952, p. 177), “serves to clarify and to hold attention to an idea until it becomes a part of us.” Likewise, today’s politicians always launch repeated promises of better future for their people provided that they comply with their policies even if these policies run counter to the public’s interests. There is always the good of the nation that stands as a pretext for any mischievous acts.

4.2 Didactic Indoctrination

Didactic Indoctrination is associated with “authoritarian education” (Gatchel, 2010, p. 10) and is employed by the Aunts from the very beginning of the novel to prepare the handmaids for their planned future. By undergoing this process of indoctrination, the handmaids are used as a means to an end. Within this process of indoctrination, there are no choices because the ultimate product of such a process is a completely controlled-will individual. Offred emphasizes the effect of indoctrination on her behavior when she says, “I thought I was sounding like that, voice of a monotone, voice of a doll” (THT: 26). Now, Offred is indoctrinated in a way which makes her respond automatically like a machine.

The Rachel and Leah Re-Education Center which is known as the Red Center is the place where the Aunts start a process of indoctrination in which all handmaids are learned that they are dedicated to only one role which serves the good of their country. Aunt Lydia emphasizes this goal when she says, “Women united for a common end! Helping one another in their daily chores as they walk the path of life together, each performing her appointed task.” (THT: 171) They are learned that they are freed from the multiple social roles such as being wives, mothers, cooks, and maids; and are assigned to only one task, that is, they should work for the sake of Gilead in order to achieve its glory.

The process of indoctrination is manifested through the use of the bald on-record strategies. The Aunts in general and Aunt Lydia in particular have recurrently employed imperatives to subjugate the handmaids to what they say. When there are occasions which constrain a speaker to speak very directly, he/she seems to ignore face risks and decides to go “on-record” (Thomas, 1995, p. 170). Using the bald on-record strategy allows the speaker to address his recipients clearly and directly. Aunt Lydia uses this strategy to be the seeds of Gileadean ideology. Offred herself reports some of the rules which she, as well as the rest of handmaids, is subject to as follows:

I remember the rules, rules that were never spelled out but that every woman know: don’t open your door to a stranger …Make him slide his ID under the door. Don’t stop on the road to help a motorist pretending to be in trouble. Keep the locks on and keep going. If anyone whistles, don’t turn to look. Don’t go into a Laundromat, by yourself at night (THT: 34).

Here, Aunt Lydia uses the imperatives “don’t open”, “make”, “don’t stop” “keep”, “don’t turn”, and “don’t go” to convey her message directly to the maids. Using imperatives is considered to be “the most direct approach” (Yule, 1996, p. 63) of expressing “bald on-record” because the other person is directly asked for something. Aunt Lydia’s frequent use of imperatives functions to oppress, dominate and subjugate the maids into complete obedience to her message. The Aunts try to control the maids’ freedom in every aspect of their lives in order to achieve one ultimate goal, that is, the total compliance to the ruling system. Even love is restricted in Gilead, none of the handmaids has the choice to fall in love because Aunt Lydia warns them that “love…Don’t let me catch you at it.” (THT: 232) Here, it is clarified that the indoctrination process encompasses every aspect of the handmaids’ life. Similarly, indoctrination process is clearly evident in dictatorial regimes today. Under these regimes, young pupils are pedagogically indoctrinated via politicizing school textbooks in a way which serves the regime’s political purposes.

4.3 Legitimizing the Forbidden

Legitimizing the forbidden is another important tactic politicians use to proliferate for political myths. Within dictator systems, like those spread today, political regimes are always trying to find proper justifications for what is irrational, violent, forbidden, or outlawed. In the novel, the Gileadean regime, with its propagandist machines represented in the Aunts, starts a brainwashing campaign to guarantee the achievement of the Gileadean sacred reproductive mission. They propagate for forbidding the permissible and permitting the forbidden. This is done
for one goal: the good and glory of Gilead. The discourse of the novel witnesses many examples in which Gileadean system legitimates what is considered to be forbidden under the guise of *the good of the nation*. Despite the religious garment the Gileadean system wears as a theocratic regime, it comes to enforce women to have sex openly with their Commanders in what is called “The Ceremony”. Offred describes the Ceremony as “it has nothing to do with passion or love or romance or any of those other notions we used to titillate ourselves with. It has nothing to do with sexual desire, at least for me.” (*THT*: 105) Offred’s words clarify that the ceremony is no longer than practices of rape and adultery.

Bargaining is one political ploy which is employed to legitimize what is forbidden in the discourse of the novel. Serena Joy, the Commander’s wife, uses this strategy when she offers Offred to have sex with Nick in order to give birth of a child. Serena instigates Offred to try having sex with “another man” rather than the Commander. Her bargaining requires that Offred can see “a picture of her little girl” (*THT*: 216). When Offred recounts that “it’s against the law”, Serena proceeds to release her fears saying that “I would help you. I would make sure nothing went wrong,” and assures her that “women do it frequently” provided that “it could be someone we trust” (*THT*: 215). This explicitly shows the readiness of Gileadean elites to legitimize the illegal in order to achieve Gilead’s reproductive mission.

Justification is another argumentative political strategy which is used to legitimize the forbidden. Many illegal acts are committed and then permitted under the guise of a series of justifications that target the reinforcement of *the good of the nation* myth. The Commander tries to justify the oppressive sexual atmosphere the handmaids suffer in Gilead by declaring that “this way they’re protected, they can fulfill their biological destinies in peace, with full support and encouragement.” (*THT*: 231) The Commander attempts to emphasize that the handmaids are protected under Gilead which was missed before. He uses the word “destinies” rather than, for example, “task” or “job”, to emphasize that the handmaids have no chance to escape their determined fate in Gilead; they are dedicated either to give birth of children or to be sent to the colonies. The Commander proceeds to justify the Gileadean irrationalities against the handmaids when he says, “you can’t make an omelet without breaking eggs” (*THT*: 222), which conveys that there are always prices for any revolutionary act even if they require violence and oppression.

Furthermore, the Commander tries to justify the whole problem in Gilead when he says that “it wasn’t only with the women,” but it “was with the men.” (*THT*: 221) The Commander tries to convey to Offred his belief that men share women the same suffering in Gilead. He states that the problem was not in sex since, for him, “anyone could just buy it”, but the problem in Gilead according to him lies in the fact that “there was nothing to work for, nothing to fight for”. He summarizes the problem of Gileadean men in two things: “Men were turning off on sex” and “they were turning off on marriage” (*THT*: 221). His justifications function to establish a common ground with Offred and to create an atmosphere of closeness which assures her that it is not only women who suffer under Gileadean regime but men have their share in such suffering as well. Correspondingly, many forbidden acts are legitimized in the hands of dictatorial regimes today, such as acts of detention committed against political opponents in the name of the good of the country.

4.4 Beautifying the Present and Vilifying the Past

Beautifying a regime, while being in office and vilifying another, when it is out of office is a political strategy which is always used in everyday politics. The employment of this strategy attempts to influence world opinion, that is, the minds of the public which in turn plays a part in shaping their responses and attitudes.

In the discourse of the novel, euphemism is used to beautify the Gileadean era. It is always manipulated by politicians to hide facts and beautify lies. To Allan & Burridge (1991, p. 11) any euphemistic term is used as “an alternative to a dispreferred expression.” In Orwell’s words, “euphemism is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable.” (Orwell, 1999, p. 501) Early in the novel, Aunt Lydia uses the word “ordinary” to describe what the handmaids are used to do in Gilead. She tries to euphemize all acts of domination and suppression to be ordinary. She proceeds to emphasize for the handmaids that “this may not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will. It will become ordinary.” (*THT*: 43) Aunt Lydia’s use of the modal “will” functions to emphasize that what she told them will be executed in the near future. Furthermore, Aunt Lydia euphemizes death when she says, “death is a beautiful woman” (*THT*: 175) in an attempt to beautify the Gileadean regime and to deceive the handmaids so as not to suspect the justice of Gilead.

The Commander also beautifies Gilead’s regime when he describes what is happening in Gilead as just a return “to Nature’s norm.” (*THT*: 232) He tries to curtail all kinds of domination committed against the handmaids as something natural and normal because these actions target one sacred goal, that is the good of Gilead. The capitalized “Nature” is very indicative here since dictator systems are always employing words such as natural,
ordinary and normal to justify the atrocities they commit against their people.

On the contrary, the pre-Gilead era is frequently vilified in the hands of both the Aunts and the Commander. This vilification process starts when Aunt Lydia describes the pre-Gilead era as “the days of anarchy” (THT: 34). The word “anarchy” here carries the negative connotations of disorder, war, fear, and instability. The use of such a word indicates that it is something of the past and is now replaced by an era of peace, security and stability. The Commander also plays a part in vilifying the pre-Gileadean age when he describes it as “just an anomaly” and “just a fluke” (THT: 232) in an attempt to undermine the previous regime. This has been always the ideology that is adopted by some ruling systems today. The new system highlights the mistakes of the previous one and undermines its achievements.

4.5 Dehumanization

The good of the nation myth continues to be propagated for by an incessant process of dehumanization. The handmaids under the Gileadean regime are dehumanized for the sake of the alleged prosperous future of Gilead. They are deprived of their freedom; the freedom to choose for themselves. They have no control over their lives. Aunt Lydia tells them, “There is more than one kind of freedom… freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from.” (THT: 34) The freedom which Aunt Lydia mentions tends to restrict the handmaids’ right to choose. The Gileadean freedom controls the behavior of citizens. By this freedom the handmaids are deprived of both their bodies and identities. The use of the past tense “was” functions to emphasize the end of the past era that will never come again, whereas the use of the present progressive passive in “you are being given freedom from” emphasizes continuity and permanence for Gilead’s regime.

The handmaids are also deprived of their feminist identity. They cease to fulfill their natural role in life. In the eyes of Gilead state, they are only “viable ovaries,” “containers,” “two-legged wombs,” “sacred vessels” and “ambulatory chalices.” (THT: 107-146-153) Here, the handmaids are deprived of their human nature. These phrases are far from being attributed to a human being. The use of the phrases “sacred vessels” and “ambulatory chalices” is highly indicative since they are employed to envelop the proposed national task of the handmaids with honor and singularity. Now, it is clear that the inside part of the handmaids’ bodies is the most important thing while their souls, emotions and feelings are not to be considered here. Offred herself says that “it’s only the insides of our bodies that are important” (THT: 107) because only through the handmaids’ inside bodies children can be produced to Gilead. If one of the handmaids fails to do her assigned task, she will be declared “unwoman” (THT: 137), which means that she will be sent to the colonies where she works hard till her death. For the handmaids, to be declared “unwoman” means death. Offred emphasizes this when she answers the Commander’s question, “you want a baby, don’t you?” (THT: 71), she replies “Yes…Give me children, or else I die.”(THT: 71). Consequently, giving birth to a baby means life while the failure means loss of not only identity but life as well. Within Gilead, women are dehumanized to be “national resource” (THT: 75) which guarantees the accomplishment of the good of Gilead represented in the fulfillment of its reproductive mission. It is important to mention here that the inhuman treatment political opponents lead in prisons today, here and there, is a clear example of how those persons are dehumanized in the name of securing the country from the danger which might occur if they are set free.

4.6 Religionization

As a theocratic state, the Republic of Gilead religionizes every aspect of daily life. Everything is circulated by religious trimmings where “GOD IS A NATIONAL SOURCE” (THT: 225). The capitalized form of the slogan is highly indicative since it adds more emphasis on its meaning and importance. Religion is used for justifying the violations committed against the public as is the case with fundamentalist regimes that use religion as a constitutional shield for their mischievous acts. The Holy Books, such as the Bible and the Holy Quran, play an important role here. Within Gilead, some verses are skillfully selected and ideologically interpreted in a way that supports the regime’s political agenda. These religious verses are conceived to be general slogans that organize the lives of people.

In The Handmaid’s Tale, some biblical expressions, such as “Blessed are the fruit” and “May the Lord open” (THT: 294) are ideologically chosen to be slogans that replace the ordinary terms of everyday conversations. Other examples of the religionization process in Gilead can be found in the different phrases which are directly quoted from the Bible to manipulate the Gileadean public. “Blessed be the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” “Blessed are the merciful,” “Blessed be the meek,” and “Blessed are the silent” (THT: 100) are all used to manipulate and silence the handmaids, on the one hand, and to emphasize the good of the nation myth, on the other hand. Religion is deceitfully employed to be an ideological basis which defends and justifies
the Gileadean system domination and control over the masses. Furthermore, all acts of spying, which are supposed to be illegal, are religiously justified by Gilead’s system: “For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to know himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect towards him.” (THT: 103) These words are usually said by the Commander at the monthly praying ceremony. They are quoted from the Bible to legitimize acts of spying which prevail on the Republic of Gilead.

Slogans facilitate the process of domination because they always summarize the ideology of an individual or a group. Fowler & Kress (1979, p. 41) notice some linguistic features of slogans as the omission of agents and the nominalization of verbs, the thing which makes it difficult “to infer the roles associated with the underlying verb”. This is clearly shown in the slogan, “from each according to her ability; to each according to his needs” (HT: 127) which the handmaids recite “three times, after dessert.” It is one of the religious slogans that are used in Gilead to emphasize the reproductive mission devoted to the handmaids. According to Hahn (1989), slogans are simple, popular and effective techniques of conveying ideologies. Because they are used to express the adopted ideology of a particular party or a group, but with the passage of time they cease to express any ideological belief and come to be a belief themselves.

The climax of religionization process is reached when the myth of the good of the nation, represented in giving birth to more children, is also religionized by emphasizing the role of the handmaids in Gilead. The handmaids are always told of the religious role they adopt in Gilead’s society for the good of their country:

And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, “Give me children, or I shall die!” And Jacob’s anger was kindled against Rachel; and he said, “Am I in the place of God, who hath withheld from you the fruit of the womb?” (THT: 99)

Now the Gileadean system tries to convey that producing more children for Gilead is something divine. Committing themselves to fulfill such fake religious role means that the handmaids work for the good of their country. Using religion and religious texts to find justifications for political irrationalities has always been an effective tool in the hands of any theocratic regime today.

4.7 Nonverbal Strategies

Nonverbal language is an indispensable element in the production of the myth of the good of the nation in the novel. This nonverbal language is represented in the use of violence which is employed by dictatorial systems to control and dominate their opponents. Violence is profoundly employed in the novel physically and psychologically and then justified as mere necessities to achieve the good of Gilead. The first act of physical violence is clearly shown in the severe punishment Moira has because of her disobedience to the rules. Moira is taken to the Science Lab, a place none of the maids “ever went willingly.” (THT: 102) Offred tells us that “they used steel cables, frayed at the ends” (THT: 102) to punish Moira whose feet “looked like drowned feet, swollen and boneless.” (THT: 102) Offred maintains, “They looked like lungs.” (THT: 102). After Moira’s punishment, Aunt Lydia launches a direct threat to the rest of handmaids, saying that “remember, for our purposes your feet and your hands are not essential” (THT: 102). Aunt Lydia’s words function to state that the handmaids’ organs, bodies, and even souls can be sacrificed with for the sake of the country. Her words imply a strongly-worded message of threat that anyone tries to object to Gilead’s rules or get involved in an act against the country will taste the garment of torture and will have the same fate of Moira.

Another form of physical violence is practiced by the Eyes, who represent the secret police in the novel, against one of Gileadean people. Offred describes what is happening:

They grab a man who is walking along…an ordinary-looking man; slam him back against the black side of the van. He’s there a moment, splayed out against the metal as if stuck to it; then one of the Eyes moves in on him, does something sharp and brutal that doubles him over, into a limp cloth bundle. They pick him up and heave him into the back of the van like a sack of mail. Then they are also inside and the doors are closed and the van moves on. It’s over, in seconds, and the traffic on the street resumes as if nothing has happened. What I feel is relief. It wasn’t me. (THT: 179)

This violent act summarizes the extent to which violence is employed in Gilead to subjugate others. The use of the adjective “ordinary” clarifies that the victim is not a political opponent to the regime which in turn emphasizes that violence in Gilead has no limits and is rationalized to achieve other purposes. The verbs “slam” and “heave” also function to clarify the amount of brutality used against the victim. Again, resuming the traffic on the street immediately after the accident demonstrates the state of helplessness, passivity and submission people in Gilead reach. This helplessness is also emphasized by Offred’s words, “What I feel is relief”. All that Offred cares about is the only fact that she is not in place of the victim. It is the feeling of despair and
subjugation which dictator systems seek to create among the masses in order to guarantee their silence.

A further form of violence is practiced psychologically and manifests itself in the representation of the “Wall” where people are hanged and executed for violating Gilead’s rules. The wall is a symbol of torture and fear which the Gileadean regime is concerned to keep. It conveys terror and psychological disturbance to all Gileadean people. These terrifying feelings are always there even if the wall is empty. Offred recounts that “somehow the Wall is even more foreboding when it’s empty like this…But vacant, it is also potential, like a storm approaching” (THT: 174). Offred’s statement, “they don’t leave the bodies hanging as long in summer as they do in winter, because of the flies and the smell” (THT: 174) emphasizes malicious treatment which Gilead’s regime practices against the public. They exceed the limits of brutality by not only hanging the executed bodies on the wall but also by leaving these bodies hanged for a time after their death. Violence, whether consummated physically or psychologically, restricts the freedom of recipients and forces them to adopt only one choice which serves to achieve the objectives of some dominant elites. The recurrent violent acts, including bombing, killing and torturing, which are committed against the innocents in different parts of the world today in the name of fighting terrorism, are clear examples of the extent to which violence is manipulated to oppress under the guise of the good of the nation.

5. Conclusion

This paper discusses the linguistic manipulation of political myth in Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale by using political discourse analysis. The paper shows that through the dystopia, Atwood is critiquing the manipulative use of language against women. Therefore, through presenting the abuse that women suffer she is simultaneously saying something about politics now. The linguistic study of the novel emphasizes the connection between what happened in the novel and what is going on in everyday politics by emphasizing the effective role of language as a means of attitude change, and the important role of myths in contemporary societies as a means of manipulation and oppression. The analysis demonstrates that the discourse of the selected novel witnesses the manipulation of some political discourse strategies to propagate for the good of the nation myth. The paper shows that the discourse of myth is systematized by those in power to affect attitudes and re-direct behavior into submission to their goals. Linguistically, this is evidenced by the skillful use of some verbal and nonverbal political discourse strategies which are employed to create some sort of ideological reformation of the handmaids’ attitudes so as to enforce them to adopt one way of thinking.

The discourse of the novel also shows the integration of the lexical, grammatical and pragmatic levels of analysis in the propagation of the good of the nation myth. Lexically, the good of the nation myth is emphasized by the use of some words and phrases that are ideologically selected and manipulatively represented through euphemism, promises, repetition, bargaining and justification. The use of agency via the employment of specific pronouns, such as the inclusive “we” and the second person pronoun “you”, the use of truth modality “will”, together with the specific use of past and progressive tenses are grammatically highlighted as indicative in the discourse of political myth. On the pragmatic level, the selected novel demonstrates the use of the bald on-record strategies for the didactic indoctrination of the handmaids. Also, violence is highlighted as an effective nonverbal tactic in the propagation for the good of the nation myth.

Finally, the analysis of the selected data reveals that the good of the nation myth is ironically fake because it targets the benefits of only those in power. The discourse of the good of the nation myth is linguistically employed to manipulate the handmaids into complete compliance to dominant elites in a way that serves their continuation in power. Within dictatorial systems, political myths in general, and the good of the nation myth in particular, serve to be frames for the subjugation of people. They are used to manipulate rather than to illuminate. The paper shows that politicians manipulate myths linguistically to normalize their irrationalities and legitimize their injustices.

Acknowledgements

This research project was supported by the Deanship of Scientific Research at Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University under the research project No. 4160/02/2015.

References


**Copyrights**

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).